The Difference Between Martyrdom & Suicide (is Press Coverage) by heavensvnt

Category: Danny Phantom
Genre: Attempted Suicide, Blood, Canon-Typical Violence, Danny is literally on the verge of death in this, Danny is stubborn as a mule, Depression, He can't help it, Immortality sucks, M/M, MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH IS ONLY TEMPORARY BE NOT ALARMED, Not Phantom Planet Compliant (Danny Phantom), Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Pre-Slash, Protective Vlad Masters, Self Harm, Suicidal Thoughts, Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms, Vlad Masters Being an Asshole, Vlad plays doctor, pompouspep, the one where the author is lowkey venting and projecting onto one Danny Fenton
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Summary:

Immortality rears its ugly head in Danny's direction, leading him to search for a loophole in its design. He nearly finds it when his worst enemy decides he couldn't allow it.

or

Danny finds the difference between martyrdom and suicide.

Relationships: Danny Fenton/Vlad Masters
Comments: 5
Kudos: 46

1. All Shooting Stars Crash into Me

Danny was in a puddle of his own blood.

And for the first time since his accident, he felt at peace.

He laid out in a dirty alley way as still as a statue. Green and red blood paints his body, soaks his clothes, stains the ground below him. This is fine.

This is fine.

The rise and fall of his chest is painfully slow and equally as distressing. A hit to the chest made him breathe with a slight wheeze, the rattle of his lungs barely heard over the commotion on the main road.

This is fine.

People were running around like chickens without heads even after Skulker was finished with the poor town. Smoke went up from car accidents and cursing could be heard from store owners that wonder how the hell they're going to repair the shop windows Skulker crashed through. Children who had been playing in the playground ran into their parents' arms sobbing. Danny lays out, defeated.

God, if he knew how good it felt to lose, he would've done it sooner. Though the pleasure was less in the actual loss but in the pain he felt lying there. That it would finally be over. It was close to a spiritual experience if he ever felt one, the touch and go between life and death.

He was looking for a fight, admittedly. He had provoked Skulker. He

had barked without the promise of a hard enough bite. Skulker delivered discord and a grade A ass whooping without complaint. He actually had a smile on his face as he heard the boy's body smash to the ground, cracks in the asphalt below him.

Danny was sure he was dead.

A part of him was relieved.

His eyes looked up at the sky above him with a certain fondness as he began his drift into unconsciousness. The sun was setting, the clouds were moving in to hide away the sky, the birds seemed to fly in slow motion across his spotted vision.

It looks so nice.

This is fine.

To tell the truth, Danny had been waiting ever so patiently for the day he couldn't hold his own. Waiting for the day he'd get hurt so bad he wouldn't get back up (he had a nasty habit of taking a beating like a champ). He's been praying for something to happen, for a bus to hit him, for a jet engine to fall from the sky, for something to finally roll him out stage left.

Because he was tired.

So, so tired.

Something inside Danny was broken and he didn't know how to fix it.

He trashed his room the moment he realized it. Scraps of posters still taped to the wall, the rest of them lain sullenly on the floor. Desk wiped clean of all papers, books, figurines. Bedsheets gripped tightly between his fingers; the fabric wet with angry tears.

Admittedly, he's never done that before. He's never lost his shit to the point of destroying everything around him. Never let these emotions

escape the chest he locked them in. As the river of tears ran down his face and he looked around at his trashed room with red-rimmed eyes, he felt strange. Different even. Like he unleashed something within himself that's been hiding for a thousand years, or however many years were between his death and then.

He sat there in his bed with his eyes fixed on nothing, a forlorn figure smack dab in the middle of his own wreckage.

Two summers ago, he looked down the barrel of immortality with disquietude. The beginning of a state of misery he'll never be able to shake off. He graduated by the skin of his teeth, and instead of getting dealt better cards, he's no longer a part-time ghost hunter. He’s full-time.

Danny took a gap year in hopes of a *break* . He got nothing of the sort. He had to come to terms with that part of himself; the part that isn't built for turning a blind eye. He has an insatiable need to help others and he is held prisoner by it.

But being overworked was one thing. Danny has been through worse. Way worse. The work, the feelings of loneliness, just small details in his book of shortcomings.

He let all of those things consume him.

What else to do? Be happy? You're kidding.

Danny is notorious for finding ways to make himself miserable. To stay miserable. It was like...comfort. He found actual comfort in being uncomfortable. He found faux peace in it because that's all he knew. Ever since he died, that's all he felt, even if it was on the back burner. It always stayed.

Now it just gets worse.

The loneliness felt greater once the immortality thoughts he'd been trying to push away came back.

So when his body hit the ground and he felt a tick in his biological clock falter, it was like letting out a held breath.

Maybe this will be it.

Danny watches the sky breathlessly. The moon is out. A little early for it to make an appearance, especially with the clouds blocking out most of the sky. Yet behind shallow clouds, it hides.

Vlad looks so beautiful beside it.

Vlad?

Danny focuses on the face above him, vague colors becoming the all too familiar face of the last person he expected to see.

Nononono, what's he doing here?

The thought slowly tugs Danny back into full consciousness, the void that was pulling him by his feet two seconds ago seeming so far away now. The farther it gets, the more Danny feels. The pain returns with a nasty vengeance. It blooms all over his body and cuts his silence short. His breaths grow quicker, fading into labored breaths and strained moans. Moans become sobs as Vlad tries to hold him up.

He screams once and it prompts Vlad to stop. He looks so...scared. A look of concern painted in his face that Danny hasn't seen pointed to him yet. God, he is in too much pain to care anyways.

"Oh nonono..." Danny half hears, half reads from Vlad's lips.

Damnit, Vlad, just leave me here.

He says something else but Danny can't hear it over the roaring of blood in his head. Whatever it was must've been important because moments later, he feels the wind hit his face briskly and his feet dangle over Vlad's arms. Vlad must've lifted them into the air.

A scream erupts from him again, his bones feeling like they could all crumble apart. It's too much to bear, and soon, Danny actually passes out.

The next hour is but a fleeting memory, consciousness going in and out, surroundings fading to black before he could figure where he was. There are moments when the pain is so clear, he's so lucid, he swears he might've actually pierced the veil right into hell. Hands linger on his bruised body and it's like fire licking at his nerves.

He half regrets getting into that fight with Skulker.

It all comes to an abrupt stop when he jolts awake, screaming out when he's back in reality, gasping like he's had his head held underwater.

Danny opens his eyes and sees...well it certainly wasn't his room. Someone else's pillow, someone else's sheets, someone else's bed. His temp drops on instinct, adrenaline ready to send him fighting or flying. The room is dark and silent and it doesn't hesitate to throw him back into another panic. He really has a habit of falling asleep and waking up in random places. It was a bad habit. He's keeps getting thrown into problem after problem after probl-

The door opens suddenly, and Danny doesn't think twice to shoot at it, a neon green ecto-blast practically flying from him involuntarily. Panting, he watches as it burns through it, swiftly dodged by the person who opened the door in the first place. Vlad.

What the fuck?

Vlad lets out a breath he held, an indignant stare pointed towards the thoroughly spooked boy across him. "Good morning to you too, Daniel."

"Where am I?" Danny looks around wildly, hand still up as to keep the distance between them (and maybe another blast).

"In my home," Vlad says placatingly, taking slow steps towards him. "If the stark difference in your comforter's thread count my own didn't give it away."

That little poke at Danny didn't do its job at eliciting the usual response. Instead, it's met with more uneasiness. Danny doesn't even look at him. He scrambles out of the bed and clumsily falls on the

floor on his way. As the blanket is dragged away, it reveals bloody bandages wrapped around his torso, legs, and arms. He looks down at them in horror.

"Where are my clothes?" He's breathless.

"A lost cause. They were ripped to shreds and crusted in your own blood. They had to be discarded--" Vlad had taken more slow steps toward the boy in confidence, but it only seemed to throw gasoline into the fire burning inside Danny. He sees the same fire burn violently in the boy's wild eyes as he threatens to shoot him again. "Stay the fuck away from me."

Vlad raises his hands placatingly, though his expression showed no give. "No need to get *violent* , Daniel. I was the one to nurse you back to health after all."

"You weren't supposed to be there," the boy says with deplore, too caught up in the highway of racing thoughts to fully comprehend what Vlad was saying. He tried to allow more distance between them but ended up hitting a wall. Awkwardly, he caught himself and regained balance.

As if Vlad was waiting on him to adjust himself, he waited just another mocking moment later to see if Daniel was finished tottering on his feet. He scoffs, folding his arms over his chest, "I *wasn't* supposed to save you from imminent death?"

"You should've minded your own business." Danny returned his eyes to his in disdain, grimacing down at his wounds all wrapped up. It wasn't supposed to go like this. He wasn't supposed to leave that stupid alley. He wasn't supposed to leave, live.

Vlad had focused quite the vexed expression on him, utterly confused by this reaction. "You don't seem terribly grateful."

Danny snorts derisively, "You don't say?"

They seemed to be having a staring contest until Vlad willingly lost, looking down at Danny's arms. He takes those forbidden steps forward and reaches out for him, "If you're not careful, you'll tear

those sutures I slaved over."

Danny jerks away as Vlad touches him, but Vlad is quick to grab his arm back with force, sending pain up along his arm like lightning. Vlad keeps him still despite the boy's attempts to wiggle away. With one hand, he peels up one of the bandages only to grimace at the unhealed wound.

"You're not healing..." Vlad says quietly to himself. Danny's frantic movements seemed to have halted at that, his eyes following where Vlad stared pensively. Vlad carefully inspects the damage a bit longer, checking for any signs that maybe he was wrong. He finds nothing other than a bleeding wound healing painfully, *humanly* slow.

Danny yanked his arm again, this time finally breaking free from Vlad's grasp. He carefully holds it, hissing at the burn. He moves another five steps away and watches as the man silently blows a fuse.

"I cannot help you if you keep running away, Daniel."

"I never asked for your help. You remember that, " Danny pointed at him. "Don't bother putting it on my tab."

Vlad nods, "Oh, your tab? The one that keeps getting longer each time you screw up?"

"Name one time you came to my aid, fruitloop."

The nickname did its job of striking a nerve. Vlad rests his hands on his hips, "Your fainting spell after slimly defeating Pariah Dark. Who scooped you up and returned you home?"

"Great, you're a human being. Congratulations."

"The entire afternoon I was subject to psychological torture granting your every wish, from baking to foot rubs--"

"That was to save your own ass. That doesn't count."

"Oh, I'm sure the smell alone *counts* ."

"Well I don't care!" Danny snapped. Vlad notes the way he winces at moving so suddenly. "I don't care how many times you *think* you saved me or how much gratitude you *think* I owe you."

Vlad shakes his head, "Really, Daniel? Not even a *little* appreciation for saving your life? I know we may have our differences, but I didn't take time out of *my* day for you to *bleed* all over my sofas and burn *holes* in my *door* !"

"Who said I wanted to be saved?" Danny blurted out. He was too angry to hold back. The tension between them was met with a sudden silence, a look of confusion on Vlad's face that somehow made Danny angrier, all his emotions coiling inside of him like a hot spring. Vlad wasn't supposed to see any of that. Nobody was supposed to. Vlad wasn't supposed to take care of him only for Danny to be in debt to him forever. For saving his life. What a joke.

Vlad robbed him of his chance.

This is all Vlad's fault.

He huffs with anger, running his hands down his face in frustration. He feels himself get sick at the sight of that look on his face. The same look his parent's pointed at him like loaded guns, like he was *crazy* .

Danny wants to punch it right off of his face. He almost does when a large hand grabs at his arm again, this time a lot gentler from before.

"Well, you might not want to be saved, Daniel, but I think we can both agree you'd like to be seen with *all* your limbs attached in an open casket viewing."

Vlad gave the wound a once over again, perplexed by it. He turned said gaze to Danny before cutting his eyes off of him with an eye roll. He beckons Danny to follow him, and to his surprise, Danny acquiesced in his decision to do so.

"Let it be known," Vlad suddenly growls, his voice laden with menace. He grips harder, jerking Danny. "My generosity is not a matter of charity. I stuck my neck out for you, and I can leave you

bleeding to death on the side of the road the next time you cross me. I suggest you be grateful it was *me* who found you and not the Men in White. Do you understand?"

Danny only matched his energy and then some, burning gaze locked with Vlad's. He looks downright murderous in this light. It was enough of an answer for Vlad to allow himself a wry smile.

"Thought so."

"Fuck," Danny cursed as Vlad's needle passed through the tender skin of his bicep, the pain driving him further into insanity. He had managed to be silent and tough it out for the majority of this, but Vlad had to be going purposely, painfully slow just to spite him.

Vlad bit off the thread and tied it, looking back up at the boy who was sweating bullets. His hand found Danny's shoulder as he reached for something in the medical cart beside them. Danny went stiff almost immediately, half scared about what the hell he was going to do now.

Vlad pulled out the alcohol, popped off the cap, and poured a little on the newly stitched wound. His hand did its best at keeping the boy down but he soon had to use another. Once he calmed down, he dug into the medical cart again, this time only taking out bandages.

"If you undo *these* stitches, Daniel, this will be the third set. I don't plan on playing doctor a third time. I trust you've done this all many times before to know what to do."

"Many is an understatement."

Vlad stretched the bandage under the boy's arm and started wrapping

counterclockwise, evidently not trying to be gentle. It's only when he accidently knicks Danny, hears the boy cry out, does he slow down.

Danny's anger is shown plainly on his face. It loomed over Vlad as he continued.

Danny felt like he was sitting on hot rocks, his body just vibrating with discomfort.

Vlad's lab wasn't his ideal hangout spot, but here he sat atop a surgical table getting his wounds licked and tended to. It was like being in a cage with a lion, and it almost was. Vlad was on the top of the list of people he'd never touch with a 12 foot pole, people he'd never leave around his drink, people he'd rather chew off his arm than be around for more than 5 minutes at a time.

Now, he sits in the same lab he's tumbled around and fought bloody with the man. The same lab he wouldn't be caught dead in if it weren't by courtesy of one of Vlad's schemes.

The same man who saved him.

"So, would you rather I address it now or later," came Vlad's voice wedging its way into the deafening silence. He kept a firm grip on the bandage as he reached for something to hold it in place.

Danny scoffed, "Never sounds great."

That response was enough to make Vlad freeze, glowering in Danny's direction. "So that'll be a *now?* "

Danny angrily tugged his arm away from Vlad's loose grip, keeping it close. "There's *nothing* to address."

Vlad barked out a laugh at that, "Ah yes, you obviously throwing yourself in front of the Skulker train isn't something to address."

"He attacked *me* !"

"Quite evidently, Daniel, and you have the bruises to show you never fought *back* ."

"So what?"

"I watch the news. I see you pulling punches at times when I know you to be a more vigilant fighter. As someone who knows your fighting style quite *intimately* , I couldn't help but notice you've lost your touch. Or perhaps you *threw it away* ."

That last sentence surely riled the boy up. Vlad was quick to beat him to speaking. "You're suicidal, Daniel," It earns him a dramatic eyeroll. "It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together."

Danny hops off the table and marches off toward the exit with steam practically blowing out his ears.

"If you walk out that door, will I get a tearful call from your parents?" It stops Danny in his tracks.

His hands tightened into fists and he swears his every nerve catches on fire.

"Or will I just have to see that on the news too?"

"You're a dick," Danny snaps, storming back towards the man with the rage of ten men. Vlad folds his arms across his chest, unflinching smugness as the boy nears him. He can practically feel the heat of the flame lit in his eyes from this distance.

"And you're *reckless* . Newsflash, dear, being immortal means you *can't* die. You keep this up, you won't be suited up in a coffin. You'll be looking at permanent nerve damage at the ripe age of...what is it? *20* ?"

"Whether I was or wasn't is none of your business."

"The second you decided to become Skulker's punching bag, you made it my business. You forget yourself, Daniel. You forget what you are."

"And what is that?"

"The *only* other halfa," Vlad says seriously, his eyes silently pleading for Danny to understand.

Oh.

Danny searched Vlad's eyes in disbelief, searching for wherever that pathetic excuse for humanity came from. He scoffs, a wry smile crawling up his face. "So that's what this is about?"

Vlad suddenly looks so transparent, like all his defenses suddenly collapsed for the moment. He was silent as his eyes still locked with Danny's and it was like he couldn't speak.

Danny saved him the trouble.

"You only saved me because it was *convenient* for you. After all these years, It's still all about *you* and your *sick* obsession with owning me like some *pet,* " he growled, eyes swimming with anger. One wrong step on Vlad's part and he might explode.

A veil of bravado veils Vlad's vulnerability almost seamlessly. He lifts his hands placatingly, "Daniel--"

"You can't allow this because that means your most *prized* possession will be damaged goods."

Vlad furrowed his brows, fed by Danny's contagious anger. "'Prized'? Don't flatter yourself, little badger--"

"No," Danny snapped. "You don't call me that." Danny reached around his arm and frantically unhooked the bandages. Vlad's eyes go round, jolting forward to stop him, "What are you doing?"

Danny continues, ripping off the bandages like he couldn't be farther from them. Bloody cloth falls like leaves to the tiled floor. Danny shoves the last one at Vlad's chest, making the man almost trip over. "Go find someone else to be your charity case. It's sure as hell not gonna be me."

"Again, this isn't charity--"

"Fine, *predatory behavior* then," Danny hissed. It struck a nerve, no doubt, and Danny was quick to return to his previous objective and getting the F out of H. "I can take care of myself."

"So, if what you say is true, do you expect me to let you walk out of here? Let you taste test every way to kill yourself until something works?" Vlad tails behind him. Again, Danny stops in his tracks. Vlad does that on purpose: strikes him with a string of words profound enough to make Danny rethink whatever the hell he was doing, like Danny's on a leash and Vlad keeps tugging him back.

Nevertheless, he retorts, "You've done worse."

Vlad scoffs, folding his arms across his chest, "How low do you think of me?"

“You keep finding new ways to floor the bar."

"Well, I can confidently tell you I wouldn't. I *won't* ."

"And what the hell are you gonna do about it, tough guy? Fight me? Sounds real counterproductive."

"Well, I can start with beating your parents to the phone. Maybe tell them all about Danny Phantom. I wonder how they'd react to my very *detailed* accounts--"

"You wouldn't."

"Oh, you clearly do *not* know me, Daniel."

There's a pause in the air swarming them. It's tension and anger festers. Danny's eyes have grown wide, and with it, his breathing quickened unbeknownst to him. He felt that rush of fear he feels each time he accidentally goes ghost at home, when he runs into his parents in his ghost form, when they poke and prod at the walls he built to separate himself from Phantom (never a success story). He felt that fear rush through him like Vlad had already picked up the phone.

By all means, Vlad could be bluffing. He could just be scaring Danny straight into submission, but J *esus Christ* , what if he wasn't? And if he did actually call, they'd fight and Danny might win, but with no guarantee. Vlad could win too. He couldn't risk it.

Vlad stares at him, eyes wandering all over his fear-stricken face with

wonder. *Look how easy I can get him to shut up.*

Danny breaks eye contact first, veiling his fear with his previous anger, however not as seamlessly as his opponent. "Why are you doing this?"

"Like I said, Daniel, I will not let you hurt yourself any longer."

"Because you want me to be your pet?"

"Because beyond whatever notion of vice you *think* I possess, I am still a *half* human," Vlad makes clear. His eyes are serious, all traces of sardonicism seemingly gone behind those blue eyes piercing Danny's fucking *soul* right now.

He challenges them. "You can't expose me without exposing yourself. Y-You can't. I go down, you go down with me."

Vlad tsks, "That would've been true 7 years ago. But you are not the only one who's grown wiser since then."

"You're a fucking asshole, you know that?" Danny shoves him again, this time harder like he's trying to start a fight. Vlad grabs the second fist headed for his chest with a burning grip, "Go ahead, blame me for protecting you--"

"I don't want your fucked up idea of protection. I don't want you involved. I don't want *you!* Don't you get tha--" Danny suddenly winces hard, tugging his wrist towards himself. With a little tug of war, his arm is free and he puts the distance back between them.

Both pairs of eyes look down at the boy's arm now bleeding through the bandages, the edges burnt up and looking like they would've set afire if Vlad held on any longer.

Vlad's expression melts into concern almost immediately as if he had forgotten they were arguing.

Danny holds his arm close to himself, tearful eyes looking up at Vlad. "Can I go now or are you gonna collar me and lock me up in a cage?"

Vlad swallows hard, something peeking out from under the veil.

Danny can see it for what it is: shame. Rightfully so. If Vlad knew what Danny knew, he would've let go of this and let Danny just go figure this all out on his own. But Vlad kept pushing, like he always does.

"Unless you want me to pay your parents that phone call, you will be here tomorrow."

"Like hell I am--"

"Two. days," Vlad shot, a look of fear still sported on his face. "You're not healing for whatever reason I don't know. It would be unwise not to monitor the problem."

He's met with silence instead of another retort. Danny must see what he sees. He continues while he still can, "Daniel, you want nothing to do with me. That is fine. But you *will* allow me to figure out your problem."

"Two days?"

"Just the two."

Vlad could almost see the gears in the boy's head turn. He knew he'd say yes–he *couldn't* say no. Something inside Vlad still feared he'd say it, and though trying so hard to mask that vulnerability he presented Danny on a silver platter, he knew Danny could still see it. He hoped he took it as desperation because it was.

Danny couldn't die. Not on his watch. Not if he could do something about it.

Danny only nods. That's all Vlad needed, though, it was all that he would count on for two days, all that he'd count on that Danny would show up.

Until then.

2. Moonlit Nights Are Strangely Empty

Summary for the Chapter:

Danny finds himself in Vlad's care once again.

Notes for the Chapter:

set two days after last chapter, the morning of their next meeting they never get to get to.

Vlad's room was nearly pitch black if it weren't for his open blinds. Even then, the moonshine leaking through the spaces dividing the blinds couldn't do much for Vlad to see more than the outlines of objects. He had been through a tough day at work, many taxing phone calls and arguments with corporate leaders over something that should've been resolved *months* ago. He had finally fallen asleep 3 hours ago, literally unconscious the moment his head hit his pillow. So, when his phone rang that god-awful tone designed to make you uncomfortable and alert, he was pissed off to say the least.

He sat up in bed, long hair falling forward onto his bare shoulders. He blearily read the name shone brightly on his phone: *Daniel* .

"Hel-"

"--is a bad idea. The guy's fucking crazy!"

"Maybe it'll work. M-Maybe this is the only way--"

"Screw your head back on your body, Tuck, and think about this!"

"We have no other opti--oh shit. He's on the line."

"Hello?"

Vlad deadpanned, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Mr *Foley,"* he rumbled. "What is the meaning of this?"

"U-Uh, Hey--Hello, Mr Masters," the background noise of groans and a heated back and forth made Vlad raise a quizzical brow. *"I, um, we..."*

Tucker takes a deep breath as if this is the hardest thing in the world.

With his sharp exhale, he lets it out, *"Danny's leg is frozen and he can't unfreeze it and we tried pouring hot water on it but it didn't work and he insisted we call you because you apparently would know what to do and he won't let us try to thaw him out anymore and--"*

"You burnt me five times!"

"Four!"

"Five!"

"Christ, would you shut up for a moment?!" Vlad rose his voice, finally hit with silence afterwards. He sighs deeply, flinging himself back down on his bed tiredly, hand reaching up to cover his eyes. "In case you forgot, it is highly inappropriate and just discourteous to call anyone after 12, let alone *4 in the morning.* Do me a favor and find better things to do than *nag* me--"

Vlad was just about to hang up his phone when Tucker frantically chanted a chain of no's.

"Listen, Mr M, he's just not listening to us and--"

"Jesus, fuck, just gimme the phone Tucker!"

"Wait, wait--"

"Give me the phone!"

Vlad hears rustling (wrestling?) on the other side of the line, Sam and Tucker no doubt having tug of war with Danny's phone.

"Listen, Vlad," Oh wonderful. Samantha won. *"On a good day, I'd rather chew off my own arm and mop the ocean before I let you within 10 feet of us, but...you are quite literally the only person in Amity that can help us. Danny insisted."*

Danny *insisted.*

Vlad sighs, "Here's a bright idea: take him to a hospital."

Sam hums a no, *"We would but...I don't know, there's something wrong with him. He's got green--which I guess is ectoplasm--leaking from his nose. I guess it's just his body reacting to--"*

"What?" Vlad furrowed his brows, suddenly sitting up in bed. "No, ectoplasm doesn't just *leak* ."

"Exactly why you need to get over here. We have no better options. We bring him into a hospital right now, he'll be front page news by sunrise."

She's right. Something was very wrong with Danny.

"Put Daniel on the phone."

"He...he can't talk right now."

"Well can you at least tell me how bad it is?"

What started as a low groan faded into a scream. It was followed with hyperventilating.

"Does that answer your question?"

"Daniel, I hope you know this is also being added to your tab."

Vlad stared down at the scene before him with his hands on his hips, carefully assessing the damage.

He approached the group about thirty seconds ago, briefly hassled by Danny's security (Sam Manson) and greeted awkwardly by his groupie (Tucker Foley).

Vlad hadn't seen the two in months; he didn't even know they still lived in Amity. The last time he did see them was Christmas dinner at the Fenton's when they stopped by for 5 minutes.

Samantha was dressed head to toe in *office casual* , suggesting she had left work to be here. Vlad wondered what kind of *office job* she had that made her work graveyard. It was pushing 4 a.m. Tucker on the other hand looked like he woke up 5 minutes ago.

As Vlad stood aside assessing Daniel's situation, he overheard Sam say something about not sleeping since 2 pm and how she has class early in the morning. Tucker offers to drive her from her job back to her dorm. She's more than relieved. Vlad settles his focus back on Danny.

This was quite a head scratcher. Literally. Vlad actually scratched his head trying to figure out how to go about this. Danny was leant up against the biggest tree smack dab in the middle of the park. His leg was frozen solid and resembled a popsicle, pant leg rolled up high to his thighs. It's all blue and veiny, almost purple. Beside him lay his busted-up converse, socks, phone, and the thermos. Vlad put his own belongings down in the same place as he knelt down beside Danny, using two stingy fingers to inspect the boy's popsicle of a leg.

Danny's laying out some heavy, labored breaths that restrict him to very few words per minute. By the way he clutches his torso suggests he has other injuries unseen. He shares similar facial bruises as his friends. Hm.

"I've been told my aid was *personally* requested, little badger," Vlad teases. He gets that eye roll he was waiting for. He stretches the boy's leg out to lay flat. "What happened to never needing my help? Your suicide mission?"

"Change of heart," Danny winces and pants hard as Vlad pushes his leg too far down, feeling like his hamstring was going to snap like a twig. Vlad notes to be gentle.

"You're too stubborn to let bygones be bygones," Vlad points out, resorting to sitting on the grass despite his expensive dress pants.

"Life's full of unfair choices, hm?" Danny practically *whimpers* . He's in a lot of pain he's choosing not to show and Vlad guesses it's only because he's here. He remembers the sounds of dying on the phone earlier, like Daniel was going to break a string of his vocal chords if

he made another sound. But here he is, quiet as a mouse.

"How does it feel, your leg?" Vlad asks, putting that thought on a back burner.

"You're fucking kidding right now," Danny flung his head back in frustration. Vlad shook his head, "Yes, it hurts like hell, I know, but how does it *feel* ? Do you feel pins and needles? Loss of feeling in certain areas?"

Danny winces as he readjusts himself against the tree, nodding feverishly, "Y-Yeah, something like that."

" *Something* like that?"

"Fine, exactly like that!" Danny fumed. "A million fucking needles stabbing me at 1000 miles per hour--"

"And the numbness?"

"I-I don't know where, I just--It's different all over. Why are you asking me this?"

"I'm trying to figure out what stage of frostbite your leg is in, *brat* ," Vlad admonished, looking up to shoot him a warning gaze. He meets the same fiery eyes from the last time they've been this close, but their swarming anger is diluted by the misery gripping the boy. The pain he's trying so desperately to hide is seen so clearly in those watery blues.

It's pissing Vlad off.

"You seem rather adamant in punishing yourself, Daniel. Who's to say you didn't freeze your leg yourself?"

"I didn't," Danny pants. It sounded like a question to himself. Then, lo and behold, "I...I didn't mean to."

There it is.

Vlad sighs deeply, wrapping his hands around the boy's ankle and foot and heating them up. To his surprise, the boy doesn't flinch. His

hands felt akin to a candlelight at this point, and if Danny wasn't feeling that, then...

His brows knit, "Do you feel that?"

"What?"

Ok, feet are numb.

Vlad moves up, waiting for Danny to feel something. Where is the pain coming from?

He reached the boy's knee when he noticed the edges of something underneath his pant leg. The skin there is dark purple as far as Vlad could see. He investigates, almost hitting his thigh when Danny flinches so violently, he shoves himself off the tree crawling backwards. Vlad froze in place, cooling himself down as he stares at what was now partially visible from this angle: Danny's unhealed injuries.

"Congratulations, Vlad," Sam starts, marching with Tucker to Danny. "You managed to be no help at all, per usual."

As they were about to grab hold of Danny's arms that Vlad had no doubt were also still unhealed, fuchsia sparked between the two friends, growing into a forcefield that pushed them two steps away. Sam follows its glow to Vlad, who was pointing an admonitory look their direction. Instead, he marches toward the boy and bends to him. He pushes the sleeves of his hoodie up under Danny's watchful gaze. He finds the wounds he cleaned and bandaged two days ago. The bandages haven't been changed. The edges are peeling up and dirty. Ectoplasm soaks them.

" *Christ,* Daniel," Vlad flings his arm away. Danny brings his arm to himself in shame.

Sam and Tucker step forward to look at the scene but Danny's quick to push his sleeve down.

He and Vlad just stare at each other. Though never addressed, Vlad somehow understood he wasn't to say anything in front of Sam and Tucker. They speak without moving their mouths, and Vlad's

reproachful gaze makes Danny wildly uncomfortable.

Vlad stands up, pocketing his wallet and car keys from the grass and Danny's stuff too. "Daniel needs to get to my lab. The sooner the better."

"Like he hell he is," Sam admonished. Vlad had expected her outburst before he even spoke. "He's not going anywhere alone with you, let alone *your* territory. There's got to be somewhere else--"

"You called *me* , Samantha," Vlad shot, moving to haul Danny off the grass. "You wanted my help, you got it. I can easily walk away."

Sam looked like she'd explode if she made any sudden movements. Though, Tucker's hand to her shoulder seemed to have defused her bomb. He gives her a look (one Vlad and Danny would share) which made her (reluctantly) fold.

"You take him to your lab, then what?" She pressed, not ready to let Danny go just yet. Vlad held him up in his arms now, swinging his arm over his shoulder.

"I'll forward you the lab report," He brushed her off sardonically.

"Just take me to my place," Danny's voice wedged between the two bulls butting heads. All 3 pairs of eyes settle on his trembling form. "I've got first aid at my place. Just...just take me there."

Danny knew it would be the only compromise the two could agree on, and he was right. Vlad adjusted in place to compensate for the extra weight he was carrying and eyed Sam glowering across from him.

Another look from Tucker and a quick look at her watch, she sighed, anger deflating to unveil her exhaustion.

She acquiesced, "Just make sure he's okay."

Vlad had never visited Daniel's apartment before despite being one member of the moving crew when Jack had trapped him into lunch last year. Lunch with the Fenton's was never just lunch. It was lunch, a long-winded chat, being dragged around the globe to outfit fittings, coupon cuttings, and more godawful long-winded stories. Vlad had made the mistake of allowing Jack and Maddie to persuade him into lunch, and by the 1-hour mark, he was being recruited into moving boxes for Danny into a U-Haul truck and signed up for a mailing list for some Ma & Pa shop Maddie swears by.

He made sure to abandon operation help-Danny-move as soon as the last box was hauled into the truck, so he never got to see the humble beginnings of the apartment he's looking at now.

It screamed *DanielFenton* . Framed band posters in the living room, boho rugs, NASA merch, and furniture that did *not* match but Vlad guessed it gave the apartment personality. It was edging hippie and leaning into hipster trash, but it was livable. It was charming.

Danny practically ran (hopped) to his burgundy couch and crashed into it, arching at the pain that shot up his spine. Vlad beelined in search of the bathroom, calling out to ask where his first aid was.

"Somewhere under the sink," Danny yelled back. It was the first thing Danny had said since the park. His voice is fading and raspy after screaming and moaning for the entire ordeal.

Vlad returned with a first aid kit that looked like it was stolen from a paramedic. When asked about it, Danny says he has a very reliable friend. A friend who is, in fact, a paramedic. A friend who shan't be named for legal reasons and Danny swore he wouldn't get them in trouble. Vlad turns another blind eye to Danny's criminal activity.

Danny's couch becomes a surgical table in the next five minutes. This time, his arms are bare and his pant leg is yanked up as Vlad investigates his wounds.

They're healing, yes. Terribly slow, yes. His scars look like someone had tried to reopen them from the inside. A mix of green and red bleed from them, just like how his nose was bleeding earlier.

That part further perplexed Vlad. He interviewed Danny as soon as they got in the car, asking who he was fighting, why he was fighting, where he got hit, etc. Piecing the story together, Danny had encountered a dozen ghosts after turning the wrong corner on a late-night walk (a walk at 3 am made no sense to Vlad and proved major-sketch) and while actually trying to make a soundless exit, he was attacked and force to fight. Danny attempts to freeze the attackers, he "accidentally" freezes his leg in the process, causing the crowd to wail on him until the appearance of their knight in shining armor: The Thermos held by Tucker himself (who was apparently alerted by his own alarm system he made specifically for Danny). The ghosts disappear into the bottle and Sam is called to help make sense of what to do with a frozen leg. The streets of Amity are safe and silent save for the three friends panicking on the phone with Vlad.

Now they're here.

Vlad didn't know why Danny was suddenly so willing to let him help. Well, *willing* wasn't the word. Danny didn't look half there in the head anyways, like his head was far in the clouds. A snap in the face was what it took to shake him down to Earth.

He hums, blood shot eyes moving to Vlad's face, leg bouncing up and down since he got there.

Vlad frowns, "Did you hear what I said?"

No reply. He's gone again, lost in a world behind those blue eyes Vlad cannot see. He watches Danny like one watches a painting, wondering where they've gone wrong, how they could make it better. Vlad wonders how he could make it better. It's an innocent thought, one that he stepped back to look down upon and wonder where the hell it came from.

Though he isn't sure if Danny's absorbing anything he says, Vlad continues gently, "Your wounds are infected. Which is no surprise given you've been neglecting changing the bandages for *two damn days* . You're still not healing properly, and an infection is no help at all. I've done all I can, but I fear nothing I do could help you, Daniel..."

Blue eyes flick to him this time, though swimming with a lingering exhaustion, "What are you saying?"

Vlad digs into the EMS kit for bandage to start dressing the boy's wounds for the 3rd time this week. He gestures for Danny to sit up so he can start and Danny follows suit.

"I'm saying..." he starts, gently taking Danny's arm into his hand as opposed to roughly handling him like last time. "You're not healing because you don't want to heal. You must know your physiology is different from a human's. You heal as easily as you breathe, but there comes a point where it becomes manual. We're dead, Daniel. We exchanged human luxuries with ghostly ones. That includes healing. You breathe because you know--it's *ingrained* in you--that you need to. You walk because you know you need to get from point A to B. You heal because...you know if you don't, you'll die. Daniel, this is all purely psychological, as far as I can tell."

Vlad positioned the bandage over the wound carefully, trying to ignore the shaking of Danny's whole body, how the leg bouncing made it worse. But at some point, the bandage kept slipping out of place, and Vlad had to put a stop to it himself placing his hand on Danny's knee.

"You need to *believe* you will get better, Danny," he said now that he had the boy's attention.

Quieter than Vlad, almost too soft to make out with his already fading voice, Danny said, "What if I don't want to get better?"

Vlad gave him a small smile, something genuine Danny studied, "You do. You just think dying will solve your problems. It won't. Trust me, I tried."

Danny's focus moves from Vad's lips to his eyes, caught off guard by that admission. You could see some life spark in his eyes suddenly, like the fact that someone could relate to him right now revived him. "You attempted?"

"I should win the record for most times ODing," It sounded more morbid out loud. "And each time, it did feel good. But each time, I

woke up gasping on the same floor I died on. Like a *cockroach* ." The words made Danny's--for lack of a better word--excitement deflate.

Vlad continues, "This life we live now, Danny. It's forever. Either sulk for eternity or make something of it."

By then, Vlad had finished the roll of bandage, taping it in place for the boy. His arm still in his grasp, Vlad wipes his thumb over it, proud of his work. He turns away from Danny now, putting back his supplies, cleaning off equipment, and getting up to toss the bloody paper and towels into the trash.

Again, he takes in the sight of the apartment around him. Again, fascinated.

"Now, how does an unemployed 20 something pay for a place like this?" It was a genuine question, but the permanent churlish tone Vlad kept was met with askance.

"I've got ghosts who pay USD in exchange for my *services* ," Danny grunted as he laid back on his couch. "But human money's no good to them anyway, so I've gotta pay my dues in ectoplasm."

Business must be plummeting then if Danny's letting his targets beat on him instead of vice versa.

"So, you're a mercenary now?" Vlad asks, giving Danny a judgmental look. It strikes a nerve; Vlad preemptively holds his hands up placatingly.

"Listen, asshole, if you're gonna judge me for how I live my life, the door's over there," Danny propped himself up on one arm, dead serious about making Vlad leave. He didn't want him here. He didn't wanna be here. He's only here because he had no other choice.

Vlad decides he might as well keep digging.

"I'm not judging," He lied. "Just wondering how the hell that translates on a tax return."

"Nunya."

"Nunya?"

"Nunya fucking business."

Vlad rolled his eyes, making sure to sell the look that he didn't care anyways. "When God dealt stubbornness, he must've dumped the entire bottle on you."

Danny cut his eye off of Vlad, leaving him to stroll through the apartment and let his eyes wander. In the kitchen, he tries to turn on the light. He flips the switch back and forth a couple times but it doesn't work.

"Your parents help you with the bills?" He questions, bringing his hands back to himself primly.

"They send about $200 for water but I wouldn't count on it. What's it to you?"

Vlad shrugged, "Just wondering how my old friends are doing these days."

Danny scoffs, "Friends you wanna either screw or murder?"

Vlad rolled his eyes dramatically, abandoning his exploration of the apartment. "When will you let that go?"

"Depends," Danny grunted as he stretched to grab a cup of something on his coffee table. "Do you still wanna screw and murder them?"

"Nunya."

Vlad contemplates opening up the fridge to be nosy, but he figures all he'll find is beer and eggs. He lets his urge win and that's exactly what he found. Well, he also found water and bagels.

So, if Vlad's got this right, Danny's got a stable job that he's been neglecting, bills he can't bother to catch up on, and overdue on grocery shopping. Then, at the top of the list, is the injuries that make the guy look like he joined a fight club.

Danny's slowly letting his life waste away because he simply doesn't

see a future past when he closes his eyes to sleep at night. Why pay bills if you're going to die tomorrow?

A stone of dread sinks in Vlad's stomach.

"Daniel, when was the last time you spoke to them? Your parents I mean."

Danny takes a long sip from his cup, setting it back down on the table. "You're full of questions today, aren't you?"

Vlad smiled halfheartedly, letting it sink back to a frown as he circled back to the living room. "What about Samantha and Tucker? You speak often?"

"Tonight was the first time I've seen them in a while. They're busy with their own jobs, school. I don't wanna bother them too much."

"I'm sure you could never bother them. You three are closer than most *siblings* . You can't let that go."

Vlad remembers how he, Jack, and Maddie were close like those three. Arguably, no one could be closer than those three, but Vlad knew how important friendships like those were. He knew how important they were to hold onto because he experienced how painful it was to let go. Vlad might be full of vices, according to Danny, but he wouldn't wish that on anyone.

"Since when do you care about my social life, huh?" Danny noticed Vlad's out of character amity and zoned in on it, sitting up to look at him.

Vlad met his eyes for the 3rd time today, feeling held at gunpoint by those sky blues. Again, he veils that crack in his steel bulwark. "Daniel, do you talk to *anyone* ? About...what's been going through your head as of late? Have you talked to anyone?"

Silence.

Vlad waits. Danny grows angry.

"I don't need this."

Vlad pulled the wrong block. The tower was crumbling down. Start damage control now.

"Need what?"

" *You* telling me how fucking *bad* I am. I don't need reminding." Danny is stiff where he lays, hands curled into fists. Vlad makes the decision to keep pressing into that sore spot he and Danny keep meeting at whenever they speak.

"Daniel," He starts. "You're neglecting work, your bills, your health, your friendships--"

"Jesus, send your critique in the mail." Danny pushes himself up to get off the couch and walk away, but Vlad won't allow him. He pushes the boy back down onto the couch. "Daniel, you need *help.* "

"Since when the fuck do you care about me, huh?!" Danny yelled, fire burning in his eyes. "Other than whatever idea of me you have in your head as some trophy to collect. Since when am I a living, *breathing* human being to you, huh?" He moves to get up again. "Get the fuck out my house with your manipulative bullshit--"

"You are so blind, Daniel--"

"Get out of my house!"

"Look around!" Vlad matched Danny's volume. "This apartment is empty! That's what the hell your life's going to look like if you continue down this road. You want to kill yourself, Daniel, great. Be my guest. But know who you're hurting when you do it. Know all the opportunity you left behind because you couldn't get through this *bump* in the *road* ."

"Vlad, I'm not telling you again--"

"You need to realize--"

"Get. out. of my house!" Danny bellowed, the slightest bit of his ghostly wail escaping him. Anymore than that and the place would be dust to dust. Vlad felt wind hit against his face and blow his hair back, his glower still focused on Danny.

He let another moment pass before he gathered up his belongings and left just like that, leaving Danny to take care of himself.